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Minorities under pressure in Pakistan

LAHORE, 17 October 2013 (IRIN) - Being a member of an ethnic or religious minority in Pakistan brings with it inherent risks - something dramatically illustrated in Peshawar last month when a bomb attack on a church killed at least 85 people.

The US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report for 2012 notes that the 5 percent who constitute the non-Muslim population in a country of just over 190 million face persecution in many forms, including "attacks on houses of worship, religious gatherings, and religious leaders perpetrated by sectarian, violent extremist, and terrorist groups." These result in hundreds of deaths during the year.

The plight of non-Muslim citizens has been taken up repeatedly by monitoring organizations. In a statement following the Peshawar church attack, Zohra Yusuf, chairperson of the Lahore-based Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), said: "HRCP calls upon the government to explain its plan to confront this menace and take meaningful steps to reassure the non-Muslim citizens of Pakistan that the government has the will and the ability to protect their lives and religious freedoms."

Like Christians, Hindus, who make up just under 2 percent of the population, face growing persecution, particularly in the form of their "forced" conversion to Islam, notably of young girls who are wed to Muslims and made to adopt Islam.

"We hear of dozens of such cases," said Amarnath Motumal, a Karachi-based lawyer and Hindu community leader. "We have no issue when an adult Hindu woman, aged over 18 years, opts to marry a Muslim, but in the case of 14- or 15-year-olds, coercion and even abduction is not uncommon. Besides, the marriage of girls under 16 years is against the law."

Parliament has taken up the issue of the conversion and abduction of Hindus. A report based on an inquiry begun last year is expected soon.

The Ahmadi community

Members of the minority Ahmadi community, which faced the worst attack in its history in 2010 in Lahore when around a 100 were killed, say they live in constant fear.

The group considers itself Muslim, but was in 1974 declared non-Muslim under Pakistani law, on the basis of beliefs seen by orthodox groups as being controversial. There are an estimated 3-5 million Ahmadis in Pakistan.

"Naturally there is fear. Pamphlets are distributed, saying Ahmadis should be killed as infidels," said Qamar Suleman, a spokesman for the Ahmadi community in the town of Rabwah in the Punjab.

"Attacks on members of our community are reported from across the country, threats are made to them and recently, in educational institutions, there has been an increase in harassment, even of very young children. A

plan was made by the peers of an Ahmadi college girl at a Lahore private institution to have her run over by a car."

He said he saw no signs of improvement in the situation - indeed many talk of a deterioration.

Ethnic Hazaras

The ethnic Hazara minority, comprising some 6,000-7,000 people according to its leaders, have also faced attacks.

It is targeted both because it is an ethnic minority concentrated in certain parts of Quetta and speaking Farsi, and because nearly all Hazaras are Shia. "The Hazaras are targeted due to both these factors, and we have no protection," Abdul Qayyum Changezi, chairman of the Hazara Jarga representing the community, told IRIN.

For months, the community has lived under siege with roads to predominantly Hazara areas blockaded, but this has not prevented bomb attacks such as the one in January this year that killed 96. Other attacks have taken place since then.

The Kihal community

The Kihal are another community under pressure. Samu Kihal, a member of the indigenous Kihal community with whom IRIN last spoke in 2010 said: "Things have been getting worse and worse for us since then. People say we are 'dirty' and now they sometimes don't even pay us as beggars - saying they will give their money only to Muslims."

"Attacks on members of our community are reported from across the country, threats are made to them and recently, in educational institutions, there has been an increase in harassment, even of very young children" The Kihals have for centuries lived along the banks of the River Indus, making their living from fishing or using reeds to construct river craft.

However, rapid development along the Indus, and in some cases, according to Samu Kihal, "the seizure of lands that were ours for generations" have threatened their livelihoods and homes.

While the Kihals say they are Muslim, the majority population rejects this on the basis that they eat 'impure' food prohibited to Muslims, such as crocodile meat. As a nomadic population they are also not entitled to national ID cards, which require a fixed address, meaning that Kihals cannot vote. "We are not even considered people," Samu Kihal said.

The Kalash community

The Kalash community, who inhabit three valleys in Chitral District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, are a pagan group. They follow an animist faith.

"In my lifetime of over 70 years I have seen our culture torn apart; our people convert to Islam just to stay safe, even though in practice they follow our ancient beliefs," said Shimshaala Bibi, in Chitral.

Apart from the pressures on them to convert, incidents such as the 2009 kidnapping of a Greek charity worker have led to a worsening in their situation.

Though NGO activist Athanassios Lerounis was released some seven months after his abduction, allegedly by Taliban-style militants, the incident brought more security force deployments in the Kalash valleys and, according to local people, a bigger threat from the Taliban who frequently target state forces.

"Because there are more men in uniform, we fear more attacks," said Razzak Shah, from the main Kalash Valley of Bumburit.

The Kalash are thought to number 3,000-4,000 individuals, with a rapid fall in numbers seen mainly as a result of forced conversions to Islam. Estimates as to numbers vary, with some accounts stating there are around 6,000 Kalash.

Bibi says people who try to help them have been driven away, and she fears a day could come when the Kalash exist "no more".

The Shia community

While the Shia sect, making up some 25 percent of the Muslim population, considers itself a part of the Muslim majority, it has in recent times been subjected to more and more attacks by orthodox groups from the Sunni majority community who question some of their beliefs.

In July this year, 57 Shias died in a bomb attack in a market place in the town of Parachinar in the Kurram Tribal Agency, and Shia groups continue to protest the killing of Shias, notably in Karachi.

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